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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000199

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DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY)

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TAGS: [ENRG](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [TX](#) [US](#)

SUBJECT: A/S BOUCHER DICUSSES DEMOCRACY AND OPPORTUNITY
WITH TURKMENISTAN'S NEW PRESIDENT BERDIMUHAMMEDOV

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Jennifer L. Brush for reasons 1.
4 (B) and (D).

Summary

1. (C) During their 45 minute introductory meeting, Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov, looking relaxed and confident, told South Central Asia Assistant Secretary Boucher that he:

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-- was elected democratically, though he acknowledged Turkmenistan's electoral system needed further development and he looked forward to technical assistance to this end;

-- welcomed U.S. assistance in particular in the health, education and security sectors;

-- recognized the need to contribute to developing a stable Afghanistan and was eager to participate in supplying a new electricity grid there;

-- understood that energy diversification was in the interests of Turkmenistan's independence; and

-- was talking to the International Committee of the Red Cross about prison access.

2. (C) Berdimuhammedov still covers himself in the outward trappings of Niyazovism -- the diamond studded Niyazov cameo lapel pin and references to the "great leader," even though his electoral platform is a marked departure away from the paranoid, megalomaniacal program of the late president. Boucher clearly informed Berdimuhammedov of the United

States' interest in seeing a democratic Turkmenistan wherein hydrocarbon wealth is used for the benefit of the people, but emphasized that the transition would, and should, be systematic. Boucher told him we were looking for concrete signs of change. Berdimuhammedov was positive throughout. End Summary,

Elections

13. (C) Boucher opened the meeting by congratulating Berdimuhammedov; offering cooperation to follow through on his election promises; and encouraging him to work toward a democratic, prosperous and secure future for Turkmenistan.

14. (C) Berdimuhammedov responded with a fairly involved apology for the shortcomings of the presidential elections, though he did not question his election as being the right outcome. "We were not prepared for this," Berdimuhammedov explained, "our constitution called for our great leader to be president-for-life, we didn't expect him to die." He continued saying the elections had to be put together quickly and that of course in the future the elections would be better organized. Nevertheless, he asserted, the people's message was clear by the high vote count he, Berdimuhammedov received - 89% of a 99% voter turnout.

Education and Health

15. (C) Boucher thanked Berdimuhammedov for his government's cooperation during the January 10-14 visit of Deputy Assistant Secretary Feigenbaum and the January 27 - February 3 team led by Tom Adams, saying those visits were critical to paving the way for a new relationship between Turkmenistan and the United States. He said that if Turkmenistan were interested, the United States was prepared to send a series of technical delegations to further explore cooperation in

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specific fields, including the social sector (education and health), economics (agriculture and budget reform), security, democracy and human rights and energy

16. (C) Responding to Boucher's emphasis on improvements in education, Berdimuhammedov said he was moving quickly to implement his campaign platform of returning to 10 years of mandatory education and a 5 year advanced education program. He expected to have most of his program in place by September of this year, Berdimuhammedov said he also intended to increase educational exchanges but, reverting to his pre-election nationalist trademark, insisted exchange students be chosen in part for their ability to represent a "national mentality." Berdimuhammedov welcomed US offers of technical assistance for curriculum modernization, particularly for higher education and especially in the areas of economics, health, energy, architecture, engineering, agriculture and computer science.

17. (C) Berdimuhammedov defended Turkmenistan's health sector (until Niyazov's death, he was Minister of Health), saying Turkmenistan had European-standard equipment and wanted to buy more from all suppliers, but lacked technical expertise.

Oil and Gas

18. (C) In response to Boucher's urging for the Government of Turkmenistan to use its oil and gas riches for the benefit of the people of Turkmenistan, Berdimuhammedov waffled, at first saying there would be no diversion from "our great leader's path," and then stating there would be greater transparency in international tenders and increased focus on exploring gas pipeline diversification. In response to Boucher's comment that selling gas "up to the border, the rest is someone else's problem" (Niyazov's policy) did not do Turkmenistan's

gas justice. Berdimuhammedov agreed that Turkmenistan would have to work harder to develop a more productive relationship with their end-users. Berdimuhammedov agreed that exploration, development, exploitation, distribution and rational budgeting of profits were all complicated questions and he welcomed Boucher's proposal for an energy-specific team of experts to come to Turkmenistan to provide technical assistance.

Security and Counter-Narcotics

¶9. (C) Berdimuhammedov singled out cooperation on counter-narcotics and border security as particularly beneficial for Turkmenistan. In a welcome sign of openness Berdimuhammedov said that the drug trade from Afghanistan and Iran through Turkmenistan had resulted in a serious drug-use problem within Turkmenistan. He welcomed a Boucher's proposal to send a border security/counter-narcotics technical assistance team, saying "our youth are suffering, we welcome your help."

Democracy and Human Rights

¶10. (C) Boucher stated that Turkmenistan needed to take serious steps to improve its human rights record and embark on democratic reform in order to improve the lives of Turkmenistan's citizens, as well as Turkmenistan's standing in the world. To this end, Boucher encouraged Berdimuhammedov to address rule of law and institution building as a basis for democratic stability. He added that the United States acknowledged that these changes would not happen overnight, but that the world was looking for signals that the new administration in Turkmenistan would move in the right direction.

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Regional Cooperation and Afghanistan

¶11. (C) In response to Boucher's encouragement for Turkmenistan to become more involved in regional cooperation, Berdimuhammedov acknowledged that developing regional trade was to Turkmenistan's advantage. "We will work with you and others on this," he said.

¶12. (C) Warming up more to discussing Afghanistan, Berdimuhammedov proudly said that Turkmenistan already had a good record of humanitarian assistance, particularly in the health and education sectors. A few dozen Afghanistani students were studying at the Pedagogical Institute in Turkmenabat and others were studying medical related subjects. He said that Turkmenistan was interested in expanding this kind of assistance.

¶13. (C) In terms of electricity supply, Berdimuhammedov said that the late President Niyazov had discussed construction of an electrical ring around Afghanistan with Afghanistani Minister of Energy Khan, with power supplied by the Mary power stations. He agreed that the major question remained finding financing for the electrical grid within Afghanistan but said Turkmenistan was planning to develop its power supply up to the border. "We're always ready to help in Afghanistan," he said, and acknowledged cooperation with the US Agency for International Development.

We're Ready to Work with You

¶14. (C) Berdimuhammedov responded to Boucher's offers of enhanced cooperation starting with a series of specialized technical cooperation teams. Berdimuhammedov said, "of course, we will develop this series of visits with you. You may be far away physically, but you are close to us through

your embassy" In closing Berdimuhammedov said, "everything will be ok."

Comment

¶15. (C) Though only a day on the job, Berdimuhammedov already is giving out strong signals that he's open to change and welcomes U.S. offers of assistance and cooperation. As Foreign Minister Meredov later gently noted, "our president is only on the job a day, he needs time." In all the meetings, Boucher emphasized the need for signals of change: Red Cross visits, an exchange of notes on Mary Airbase, opening of internet centers, visa approvals. Those, he said, are key to unlocking more cooperation. End Comment.

¶16. (U) A/S Boucher cleared on this cable.

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